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Health and taste benefits of food: The influence of context

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Public health organizations try to promote healthy eating by providing nutrition information on food packages and restaurant menu cards. However, this information is often ignored or even has an opposite effect, because health claims may negatively affect hedonic food experience (Lähteenmäki, 2013). One of the challenges in promoting healthy eating is the tendency to perceive healthy food as less tasty (Raghunathan et al., 2006). This tendency seems to depend on cultural and social contexts. It is more pronounced in USA than in France (Rozin et al., 1999; Werle et al., 2013) and in hedonic situations (a party) rather than in health-related contexts (a hospital). I report three studies into the effects of health labels on consumer evaluation of food products in different contexts. The first study looked into the effects of “traffic light” food labels on taste expectations of a healthy vs. unhealthy product. The results confirmed the negative effect of health labels on taste expectations for a healthy product, but not for an unhealthy product. The second study investigated whether the presentation context (seeing the product vs. tasting it) can alleviate the negative effect of health claims on taste evaluation of two products (healthy vs. unhealthy). The results show that tasting the product can improve hedonic evaluation of an unhealthy product, but not of a healthy product. The third study looked into the effects of health labels on the choice of healthy vs. unhealthy menu items in a restaurant. This study has demonstrated that people are more likely to select a healthy starter, but prefer an unhealthy dessert to a healthy one. Taken together, these studies demonstrate the complexity of contextual factors influencing healthy food choice. More research is needed to understand interactions between health claims and taste experience in different social contexts.

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Bionotes

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